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RAILWAY MEN IN POLITICS.

BY CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW.

THE railroad man in politics has been for some time undergoing an evolution. The presentation of the name of a railroad president before the last Republican National Convention brought the attention of the country to a railroad candidate, his possibilities and disabilities, and the question has since been working out its own solution.

In round numbers, there are about one million men employed on the railroads in this country, and probably as many more indirectly through railway supplies. But leaving out the latter class, who do not actually come under the head of railway employees, we still have an army of one million, who are all voters—comprising about one-thirteenth of the voting population of the United States.

Seventy-five thousand of this force of railway employees reside in the State of New York. Five or six thousand live in Connecticut, about twelve thousand in New Jersey, thirty thousand in Iowa, forty thousand in Illinois, and so on. There are nearly sixty thousand men on the pay-rolls of the Vanderbilt system.

The first appearance of railway companies in politics was in an effort to control the action of the political parties. To this end the patronage of the companies in the way of the purchase of supplies, of employment, and of favors of various kinds was largely used. The ablest representative of this period and type of railway man and politician was Dean Richmond, who was one of the shrewdest party managers we have ever had in this country, as well as an admirable business man. He was for years the dictator of the Democratic party, and had great influence with the Whigs, and afterwards with the Republicans.

With the entrance of Commodore Vanderbilt into railway management and ownership, the New York Central Railroad ceased to be a factor in politics as a corporation. Its purchases were made

in the open market. Its appointees were selected purely upon their qualifications for the service. Its promotions came only from merit, and all pressure of every kind upon the political action of the employees was not only withdrawn, but prohibited. This method spread rapidly all over the country, and now in no State does the railway company as a corporation take part in politics.

As to the feeling against railway men in politics, it never existed in New England. It became quite acute in this State during the protracted fight on what were termed at the time anti-monopoly issues, but disappeared after the Railway Commission was appointed. So far as politics in New York is concerned, the railway man does not differ from any citizen engaged in any other pursuit, in the consideration he would receive as the candidate for office. In many States in the West, however, a feeling of direct hostility towards or suspicion of railway men as such was cultivated by political leaders on both sides. It was a race for popularity, which at the beginning was an honest effort to secure the credit for the reformation of the abuses of railway management. In territories comparatively new, and with little responsibility on the part of the managers to distant owners, they became in many cases very arbitrary, and exercised favoritism and discriminations, which led to popular indignation and legislation; but in the effort to get the benefit of the hostility toward these abuses the orators of each party began to educate their constituencies in regard to railway ownership and the powers of confiscation possessed by the States in connection with it, and in regard to the devotion of railway employees to their companies as against the communities and the States of which they were citizens, which virtually raised a boycott against railway men as candidates for office.

It never has been decided by the test of a general election with a railway man as a candidate whether this sentiment would materialize into a serious defection of the voters of his party. But the managers of both parties have always been afraid to put a railway man on their tickets for any office in the States where this feeling existed; and in some communities they went so far that they were afraid to nominate them for city, village, or county offices.

The representatives of five States said at Chicago in 1888 that the candidacy of a man prominently identified with railroads as an officer or manager would certainly lead to a reduction

of their majorities, the loss of their legislatures and representatives in Congress, and probably of the electoral vote of their States.

The prominence given to the question of the availability of the railway employee for office by the discussion at Chicago led to the matter being taken up in the various brotherhoods and organizations of railway men. While before there had been very little feeling on the subject among railway employees, because it is next to impossible for railway men to hold public office and attend to their duties, yet as soon as they thought that they were debarred from the opportunity for political honors which lawyers, doctors, farmers, merchants, and mechanics could receive, they got mad and wanted to know the reason why.

We then came suddenly to the second phase of the railway man in politics. In the first condition his vote was largely controlled by the officers of the company in favor of candidates supposed to be friendly to its interests. Then for many years railway men acted individually and cast their votes as they pleased and according to their own independent judgments. Since they have discovered that they were under a political ban, they have, through their organizations,—which are the most perfect labor and benevolent associations in the world,—without regard to party affiliations, in many instances supported or fought the candidates whom they thought favorable or hostile to their interests. Results which have astonished everybody, and for which no one could account, in State elections for governors and members of the legislatures in the past two years, have been due to this cause. Some remarkable cases have come under my observation, where the employees, with all their supposed hostility to capital, became its protectors. They quickly saw that certain measures against the companies were intended not to remedy evils, but to cripple the earning power of the companies. They argued that this meant both a reduction of force and of wages, and their attitude towards the promoters became so threatening that the bills were either modified or dropped. The railway men were teaching the politicians the lesson that their votes were just as good as those of anybody else. Of course this could not occur more than once without the question, and its causes and remedies, being exhaustively discussed. It has led to a very remarkable revolution in sentiment not only in regard to railway men, but to railway corporations.

The violent prejudices against railway companies and their

management, many of which had good foundations in the beginning, no longer exist. Governmental and State regulations, and a radical change in the relations between the railway companies and the public, have led to kindlier feelings and a better understanding. The exceedingly rich and varied vocabulary of opprobrious epithets as against railway men has fallen into innocuous desuetude. Railway attorneys find that juries are treating them the same as any other litigants; and in legislatures and before railway commissions the companies have a fair hearing, and the merits of the case are generally impartially acted upon. Railway men in politics are gradually becoming no different from people engaged in any other pursuit.

I do not believe there are two States in the Union to-day where a railway man running for office would be cut by any considerable number of the members of his party on account of his business.

As to railway men becoming candidates for office, as soon as they know that they are not fighting against a boycott which imposes a stigma upon their patriotism and sense of duty to the public in official positions, few of them will be found willing to take office until they are prepared to quit business. All railway men are politicians, and active ones. Their constant contact with the public, and the habit of being actively interested in everything about them, make them such. But the railway is a most exacting master, and it would be very difficult for one of its officers or employees to hold a position involving his time and attention to any extent, and still continue in the railway service.

As the railways have increased in capitalization by consolidations, and by blending into great systems, concentration of ownership in few hands has become impossible. Railway shares and bonds, since the disappearance of government and State securities, have become almost the only form of investment for those who have any savings, and the proprietors of railways are numbered by millions, and found in every condition in life. The millionaire, the farmer, the artisan, the widow, and the orphan have their surplus, or their all, in railroad stocks and bonds. Hence the management of the railways, with one or two exceptions, has fallen into the hands of salaried officials who own very little of the property, but are retained and remunerated according to their ability in successfully managing the companies for the owners, satisfying the public, and meeting competition.

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